Shirley Blackwell

Q&A

SAMUEL CLAESSON

In the 1950s, there were a lot of glamorous "extras" in Hollywood that were sadly overlooked. Some of them included Sue Casey, Mary Ellen Batten, and Gwen Caldwell. One of the most prolific goes by the name of Shirley Blackwell. After a role in the stage production of *Of Thee I Sing* and being runner-up in Miss San Diego, Shirley took residence at The Studio Club where some of the greatest actresses of that era (Barbara Eden, Marilyn Monroe, and Debra Paget) started out. Since then, she has appeared in hundreds of television series, and a lot of great films like *North to Alaska* (1960), *Cinderfella* (1960), *The Errand Boy* (1961), *Goodbye Charlie* (1964), *Ruthless People* (1986), and *Batman Returns* (1992). On June 26, 1966, she married actor Jeff Lawrence and they became one of Hollywood's most striking couples with acting careers that lasted through the 1990s. Today, Shirley lives near her children, who are also actors, in Spring Hill, Florida. She and her husband (who passed in 2022) wrote their memoirs, Hollywood Be Thy Name: An Inside Look at Hollywood Actors and Extras, which offers a fascinating glimpse on what actors have to endure.

Samuel Claesson: Your first film was *It Started with a Kiss* (1959). Can you tell us how you got that role?

Shirley Blackwell: I was doing drama workshops at The Studio Club when I decided to sign with Central Casting for extra work to get my foot in the door. An agent named Bob Crosby, no relation to Bing Crosby, took photographs of me. I was summoned to the lot the following day, where I was told to dance with an actor until the director wrapped the scene. I was so starstruck that I told my family the news. Of course, they told friends and the word got around that I was in this great film. I was so humiliated after the screening because I could barely see myself in the film, and I knew that my family and friends were going to have trouble finding me too. I was cast in *Spartacus* (1960) days later, which was better because you could clearly see me walking with John Ireland for several seconds.

SC: *Bells Are Ringing* (1960) was one of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's last great musicals. How were you cast? Did you get to meet Dean Martin on set?

Shirley Blackwell: I had just gotten my roommate Shelley Morris into Central Casting's directory. They put both of us in *Bells Are Ringing*. I was already doing *The Subterraneans* (1960) across the lot, so it was convenient for me. I remember seeing Dean walking to his trailer in a trance, almost fatigued. Someone said that he wasn't himself until he had a few drinks. That was probably why he went to his trailer because an hour later, he walked out smiling, lifted me up, and spun me around.

SC: You had Alfred Hitchcock as a director in *The Birds* (1963) and was in his television series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. How would you describe him?

Shirley Blackwell: He was pretentious around us extras. I sat near his office so I could read the script, and moments later I heard him say to the director [of that episode], "I want you to tell the extras not to sit near my office! I want to keep this area clear of extras!" He was referring to me, of course, so I quickly walked across the room.

SC: You were a stand-in for several actresses during your career.

Shirley Blackwell: I was. I was a stand-in on *Manhunt*, which I was assigned to as a favor by my friend Victor Jory. He starred in *Manhunt*. I was a frequent stand-in for Andra Martin because we looked alike. The way that happened was hilarious. I was on the lot at Warner Bros. when an actor named Ty Hardin grabbed me from behind. When I turned around, he said that he thought I was his wife, Andra. It must've been a week later that Bob [Crosby] told me that they wanted me to be a stand-in for Andra on *77 Sunset Strip* ["Return to

Shirley Blackwell portrait.

In Alfred Hitchcock Presents' "Outlaw in Town" (1960), Shirley is seen at the far left as a saloon girl. Ricardo Montalban is on the right next to Patsy Kelly.

Shirley Blackwell (front row grey hair) in the Matlock episode "The Judge" (1986) with Andy Griffith.

San Dede: The Desert Story," 1960]. It was either a coincidence, or Ty told Central Casting to hire me for that. While on set, the cameraman said that she and I could be twins.

SC: Were you ever fired from a film?

Shirley Blackwell: I was supposed to appear on *The Lucy Show* with Lucille Ball, and I saw a side of her I wish I hadn't seen. As I walked onto the set, the crew, whom I'd worked with a lot at Warner Bros., were being so kind to me. Apparently, she didn't like it because the director told me that I was excused and wouldn't be doing the scene. I asked him why and he told me that Lucille didn't like the attention that I was getting.

SC: Anything interesting about *High Time* (1960) with Bing Crosby and Fabian?

Shirley Blackwell: I was a woman in a canoe. It wasn't a great role, but the last day of filming was jaw-dropping as we saw a pale, blemished blonde walk by who turned out to be Marilyn Monroe. Edith Head, our wardrobe designer, saw my stunned expression, and she said, "She hasn't been feeling well lately."

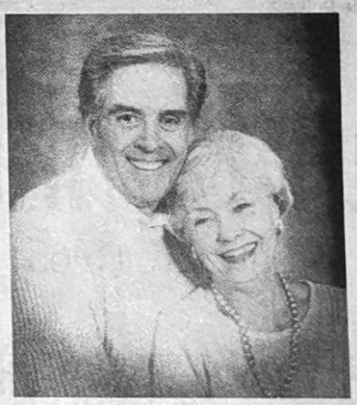
SC: You were always cast in walk-on or extra roles. Why didn't you try for something more substantial?

Shirley Blackwell: There was a point in my career where I pursued speaking roles. I certainly had the training for it. I teamed with an agent named Leigh Goren who got me some meetings with studios, but it didn't go well. I met with a producer who spent the entire interview telling me about the women he met with who were willing to wear anything to get into the business. The following day, I had lunch with Lee Sholem, a producer who was nicknamed "Roll 'em" Sholem for his effectiveness and efficiency with the many films he oversaw. I asked him frankly if it was possible for an actress to be a success in Hollywood without lowering her morals. He was brutally honest with me, saying, "I'm a director. I choose actresses who have the talent to do the part right. There are as many good actresses who will [lower their morals] as there are those who won't, and if it comes to a choice... Well, I'm only human. I'll take the ones who will." I went back to doing extra work afterwards.

On the 1986 episode "The Gala" of The Colbys, Shirley is seen here placing napkins on a table.

SC: Was there ever a role that you were offered, but rejected? How about a role that you pursued, but didn't get?

Shirley Blackwell: I auditioned for a film called *The Magical Sinbad*. I was lured to the house of a producer named Medhat Mandour. He invited me in and I sang several ballads. He said that I had the most gorgeous voice he'd ever heard, and that he wanted to cast me as a princess alongside Tom Rettig. It seemed legitimate until he invited me to read scenes with him in a bathing suit. I'll spare the details, but I left more scared than angry. My good friend Victor Joy, whom filmgoers would know as the star of *Manhunt*, telephoned Mandour and made it clear that he was not to go near me again.



Shirley and her husband Jeff Lawrence.

SC: There's been a lot of controversy regarding the #MeToo movement. Anyone else inappropriate towards you in Hollywood?

Shirley Blackwell: You can read about several incidents in my memoirs, but I'll share one. I was on several episodes of *Colt .45*, and there was this lecher named Steve Brodie. While we were waiting for our scene, he showed me a photograph of a naked woman. I ignored him, but he was persistent. He asked me if I had any cigarettes, and he started feeling around my clothes. I was so angry that I punched him and he fell to the floor. The director apologized for the incident and took me to lunch at Toluca Lake Lodge. I'm glad that the network took my side. I'd imagine that Steve had done this before, as nobody seemed too surprised.

SC: One of your last movies was *The Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad!* (1988). What was O.J Simpson like?

Shirley Blackwell: I didn't like that man. My blonde daughter was in the film with me, and O.J was smitten with blondes. He saw her, wrapped his arm around her, and kissed her on the lips—uninvited. She was so angry about it. He later approached me and said that I had a beautiful daughter. He was a creep.

SC: What advice would you give to anyone who wants to be an extra?

Shirley Blackwell: They should enjoy themselves. It's a lot of fun, and the pay isn't bad either. Once you build a reputation for being reliable and cooperative, you'll get into all sorts of films.